The welfare state evolved gradually during the twentieth century, both as a response to the vicissitudes of capitalist economy and the protests of workers and farmers for a greater share of the country’s wealth. Following World War II, a consensus eventually was reached on a welfare system that would ensure minimum incomes and services for all citizens.

Income equality significantly improved in the post-World War II period and that period itself witnessed unparalleled economic growth. This chapter reviews social welfare in Canada up to the early 1970s, after which time the welfare system in Canada began to face more serious challenges (outlined in Chapter 3).

**Before the Europeans**

The most egalitarian period of Canada’s past not only preceded the welfare state period but the existence of Canada and of its predecessor colonial provinces. For 13,000 or more years before Europeans began to settle in what is now Canada, Aboriginal groups had established complex civilizations throughout every region.

The social structures within these societies varied, from the strict equality found in semi-nomadic Northern hunting First Nations to the stratified, sedentary societies on the West Coast engaged in fishing and gathering in an area with plentiful resources. On the whole, these societies had developed mechanisms for sharing wealth and insuring collective responsibility for the weakest. Custom, rather than law, dictated the responsibilities of members of Aboriginal societies.